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ABSTRACT

To study the influence that community settings have upon peer relationships and social behavior, 81 mentally disabled (retarded and emotionally disturbed retarded) adults were observed in their intermediate care residential facility and in one of four workshop programs. In summary, Ss tended to have more extensive affiliation and to aggregate more in their workshops than in their home, though intense relationships tended to be as likely in either setting. It was also possible to classify a S's setting by simply knowing his or her behavior. Findings suggested the importance of the social ecology for successful adaptation of mentally disabled adults in community facilities. (DLS)

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Social Behavior of Mentally Handicapped Clients in Different Community Settings

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Abstract

Eighty-one mentally handicapped adults were observed in both their home and workshops. Affiliative behavior differed between settings in terms of overall sociability and the tendency to aggregate with peers. It was possible to classify a client's setting by simply knowing the client's behavior. The results suggest the importance of the social ecology for successful adaptation of mentally disabled adults in community facilities.

Social Behavior of Mentally Handicapped
Clients in Different Community Settings

Community settings for the mentally disabled differ from each other in programming and functional characteristics. What is less often recognized is the capacity of these environments to elicit widely different patterns of social behavior. Intensive interview and questionnaire studies of mentally retarded adults suggest the importance of peer relationships for adaptation in the community (e.g., Edgerton & Bercovici, 1976; Gollay, Freedman, Wyngaarden & Kurtz, 1978). The present research focuses on the influence that community settings have upon peer relationships and social behavior.

Previous research with mentally ill adults (Moos, 1969) and with hyperaggressive and normal children (Raush, 1965) demonstrates the influence of treatment and residential environments upon social behavior. We first observed the impact of the social environment upon mentally retarded adults in our studies of sheltered workshop clients in Chicago (Romer & Berkson, 1979a) and in our study with Landesman-Dwyer (Landesman-Dwyer, Berkson & Romer, 1979) of group homes in Washington State. Individual characteristics of clients (e.g., age, sex, and IQ) did not predict sociability. Instead, the average intelligence of peers in the setting, size of home, sexual composition of peers, and the presence of peers who are familiar to clients were all more important. These findings were cause for optimism because if the tendency to affiliate and form friendships were a relatively stable personality trait, many clients might have difficulty adapting in the community. Environments, on the other hand, may be much more amenable to alteration or to selection for individual client needs and can be programmed to facilitate friendship formation and affiliation.

It is always possible that some trait or characteristic that we have not yet measured predicts social behavior across settings. Our more recent research (Berkson & Romer, 1979; Romer & Berkson, 1979b) enabled us to study this issue more carefully. Clients were observed in each of two settings, their residential facility and their sheltered workshop. Since personal characteristics are relatively constant, differences in behavior between settings would probably be a result of the environment. If environments are important, we should be able to classify correctly the setting a person was seen in by simply knowing the person's behavior.

There are two ways in which environments can affect peoples' social behavior: (a) The setting might make everyone more or less sociable without altering an individual's standing relative to others. This would predict a high correlation in social behavior between settings, even though average sociability might differ. (b) The setting might interact with some personal variables and completely alter the relative sociability of individuals. This would predict a low correlation in social behavior between settings.

Method

Subjects and design. As part of a larger study of the social ecology of supervised community settings for the mentally disabled (Berkson & Romer, 1979), 81 adult clients who lived in a single intermediate care residential facility were observed in their home and one of four workshop programs in Chicago. Most of the clients were diagnosed mentally retarded (77%) or mentally ill and retarded (21%). The sample was mature in age (M = 44, SD = 12) and was mostly composed of men (72%). Intelligence levels ranged from 10 to 91 IQ (M = 47). They had resided in their home for an average of about 3.5 years and had attended their workshop programs for an average of about 3

years. Observations were conducted in the home from within one to eight months of the time they were conducted in the workshops. Although clients were nonrandomly assigned to their workshop programs, the present design allows us to determine if their behavior varies between their home and workshop setting.

Observations. Using an extensive list of behavior categories (Berkson & Romer, 1979), we performed approximately 100 randomly selected, 5 sec observations of each client's behavior when clients were free to socialize (lunch and breaks in the workshop and evenings and weekends in the home). In one workshop, however, approximately 50 observations were collected when the program had just been formed. Since the remaining 50 observations were collected several months later, they were not included in the present analysis.

Measures of social behavior. Earlier analyses (Romer & Berkson, 1979) have shown that naturally occurring social behavior varies along three dimensions. "Intensity" refers to the amount of time persons spend with particular others; "extensity" refers to the amount of time persons spend socializing with anyone at all; and "aggregation" refers to time spent simply being near others without interacting directly with them. Intensity is measured by the average and largest proportion of observations a person devotes to social groups; extensity is indexed by the amount of time a person spends affiliating and the number of groups a person affiliates with; and aggregation is measured by the the average distance a person maintains from others and the proportion of observations in which a person is seen doing something with others but not interacting with them (e.g., watching TV). We also included the proportion of time spent in dyads and the proportion of observations in which a person initiates interaction as additional predictors.

RESULTS

We first wanted to see how workshop and home settings differed on the three dimensions of social behavior. As seen in Figure 1, clients tended to spend more time affiliating in the workshop than in the home, $F(1,77) = 29.20$, $p < .01$. It appeared that the workshop was simply a more sociable setting in that the correlation between home and workshop affiliation was .80. If a client were sociable in the workshop, he/she would also be sociable in the home.

The picture for average intensity of relationships was somewhat different. The overall correlation between settings was only .47, indicating much less stability of this characteristic. In fact, there was virtually no stability across settings except for group WI, and this was the only group to have more intense relationships in one of the two settings. In all three of the other cases, relationships were just as intense in one setting as in the other.

Finally, average distance between clients tended to be greater in the home except for the recently organized setting WA, $F(3,77) = 8.36$, $p < .01$. There was also very little stability across settings in this behavior ($r = .24$). It is not surprising that distance is so sensitive to setting since it can be easily affected by seating arrangements and table size.

In summary, clients tended to have more extensive affiliation and to aggregate more in their workshops than in their home. Intense relationships, however, tended to be as likely in either setting.

Our final question was to determine if we could predict a client's setting by knowing only the client's behavior in that setting. A discriminant analysis was able to correctly classify 74% of the clients based on eight measures of social behavior. As seen in Figure 2, we can describe how the analysis distinguished between settings by plotting the average location of each setting in the two dimensions uncovered by the analysis. The first dimension appears to separate WA from the others and describes a tendency to socialize in large groups. This was the newly formed program and perhaps the uncertainty of the new setting contributed to this pattern.

A second dimension appears to vary in solitude versus socializing or aggregating in groups. The home seems to be a place with more solitude than the other three workshops. In parentheses are the proportions of clients correctly classified in each setting. Chance classification, of course, is 20% and each setting could be predicted with great accuracy. Even though the three workshops in the lower left seem quite similar in behavior, there was also a third dimension that discriminated these settings, a tendency to form intense relationships but not to be very sociable otherwise.

One might argue that our correct identification of workshop settings (73%) is only a result of clients being differentially placed in these settings because of their social skills. However, we were still able to correctly classify 75% of the clients when they were in their home. Thus their behavior must be sufficiently sensitive to setting to allow this level of prediction.

Although the results indicate that clients changed their behavior with the setting, there were some clients (N = 15) whose behavior did not change sufficiently across settings to enable differential classification. These individuals did not differ from the average of the sample in age, sexual composition, IQ or diagnosis.

Discussion

The present results suggest that mentally disabled adults are sensitive to the settings they live and work in. Even if their behavior is stable in relation to others, as in the case of extensiveness of affiliation, settings still exert an influence. On average, clients tended to be more sociable in their workshop than in their home setting.

In the case of average distance to others and average intensity of affiliation, individual differences were not very stable, but differences between settings were evident. Average distance may not be a very stable characteristic anyway since its test-retest reliability is low (r = .34). The other dimensions, however, have reliabilities that are considerably higher (r's = .70,.66).

The discriminant analysis verifies the potent influence that settings have on group behavior. It does not, however, tell us how these influences work. Some suggestions from our other analyses indicate that peer characteristics play an important role (Romer & Berkson, 1979b). Further research is needed to determine how individuals respond to environments so that the optimum match between person and program can be achieved. Our results suggest, however, that personal characteristics traditionall, used for programming decisions, such IQ, may not be very useful for predicting the social adaptation of mentally disabled adults in supervised community settings. Therefore, where a person is placed will probably have at least as much impact on the person's social adjustment as who the person is. We also hope that the findings will encourage consideration of the social ecology of community settings in planning and programming of services and in future research on these issues.

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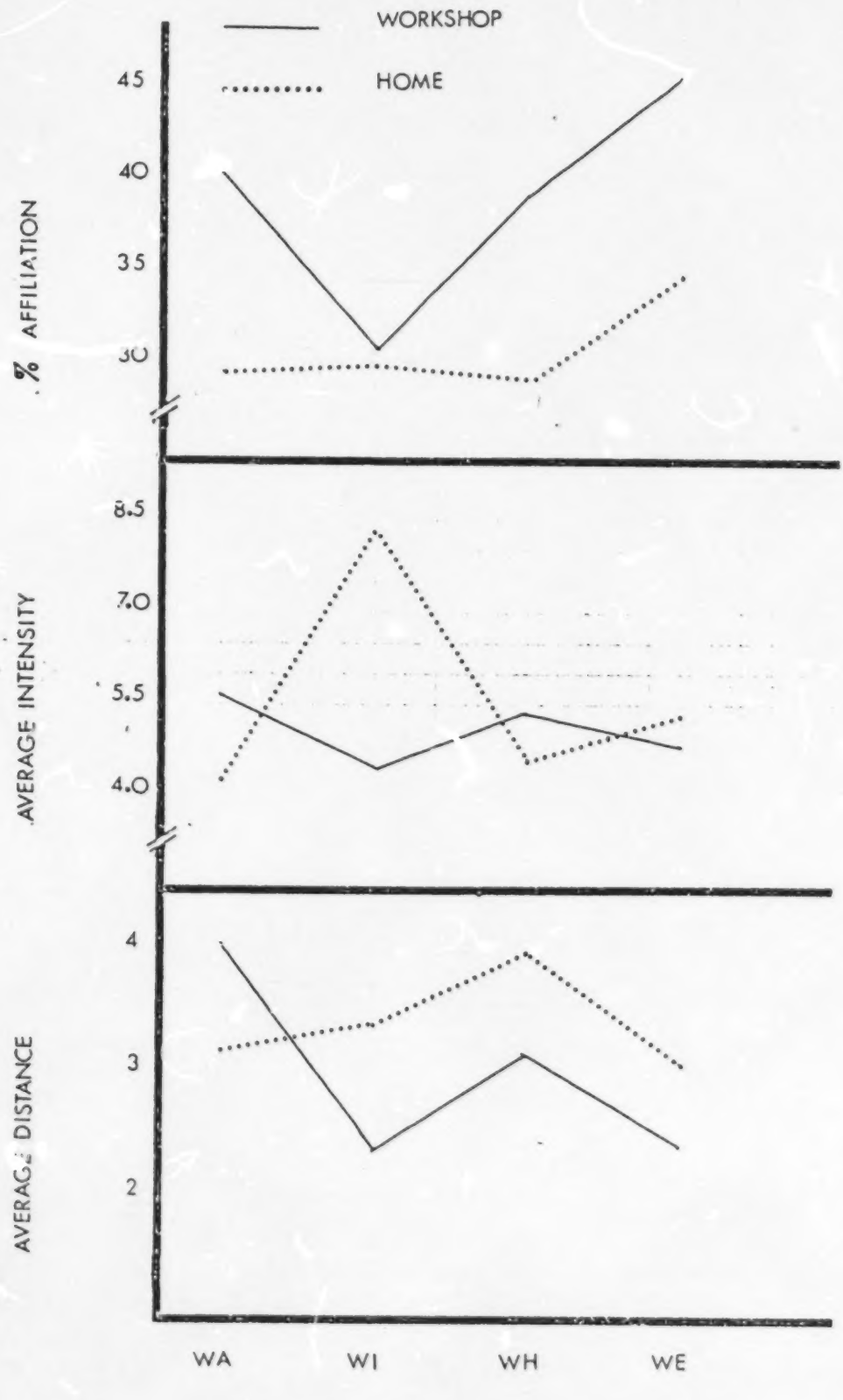
FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. The effects of setting (home vs. workshop) upon three dimensions of social affiliation.

Figure 2. Two-dimensional plat of average behavior in five settings.


WORKSHOP
HOME
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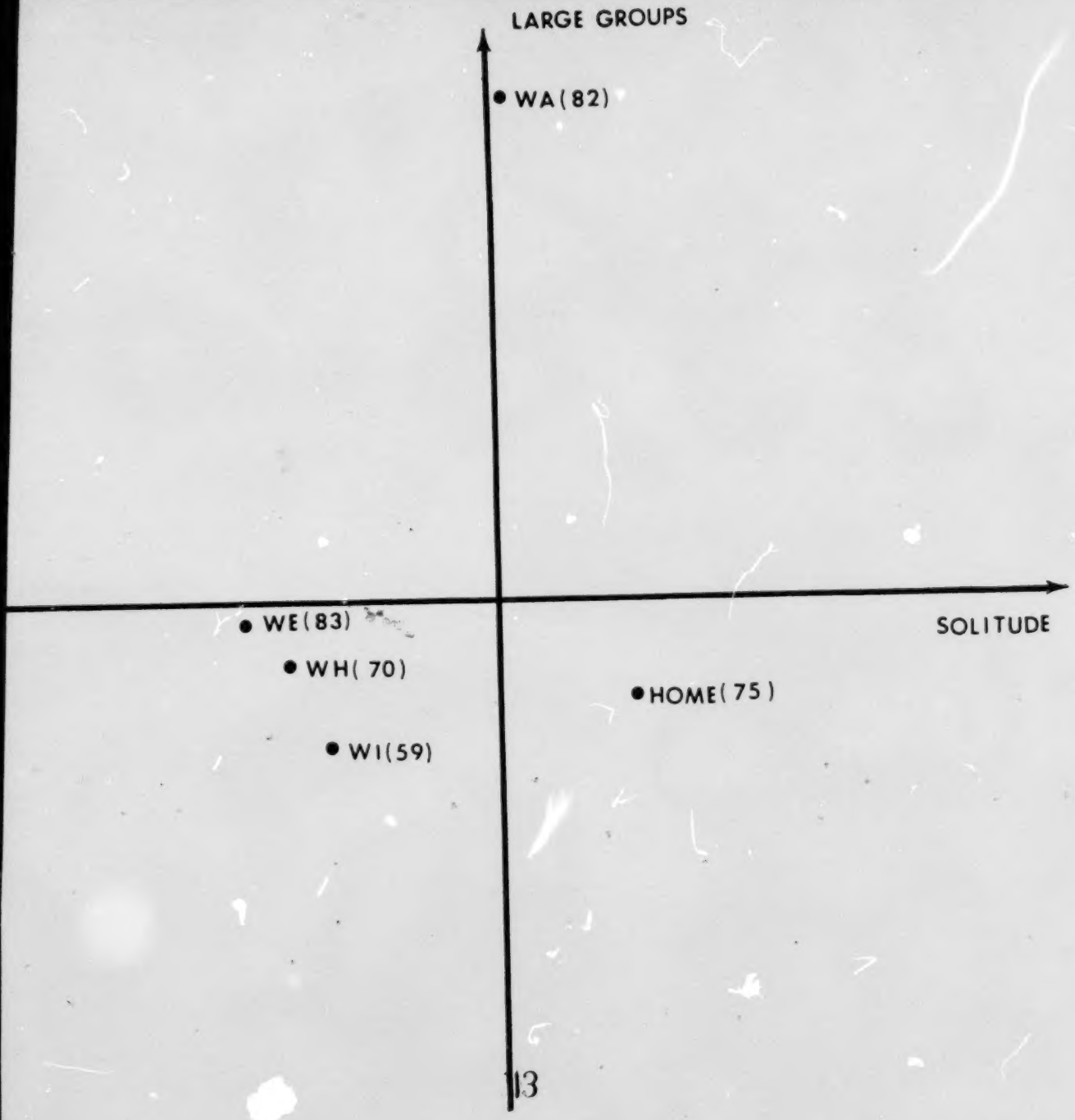
LARGE GROUPS
WA(82)
WE(83)
WH(70)
WI(59)
HOME(75)
SOLITUDE